

Talk on a Synod Preparation Online Panel on "Empowerment of the Local Church Communities"
Zoom Webinar hosted by Catholic Church Reform International (CCRI)
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The Lay Ecclesial Ministry of Coordinating a Small Church Community

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NOTE: The 2024 “Instrumentum Laboris” (“Working Document”) has a section on possible new ecclesial ministries for lay people. This panel presentation offers recommendations and action steps to the voting delegates at the October, 2024 synod gathering in Rome.

Let us begin by quoting from:

How To Be a Missionary Synodal Church, “Instrumentum Laboris” (“Working Document”) for the Second Session (October, 2024), XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Rome, Italy

<https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/il/ENG-INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf>

No. 7. “Synodality works through the [local] community listening to the Word of God.”

No. 29. “Men and women who exercise the ministry of coordinating a Small Church Community.”

No. 89. “The contributions submitted by the Episcopal Conferences speak of Parishes, Base Christian Communities and Small Christian Communities as contexts of communion and participation in mission... The parish is understood as a community of communities in the service of missionary creativity.”

No. 94. “Creating networks of Pastoral Councils at the level of Base Christian Communities, Small Christian Communities, Parishes and Deaneries right up to the Diocesan Pastoral Council.”

First, the history of the term/expression “Small Christian Community” in official Vatican documents. It might surprise many people that this term/expression is clearly implied but **NOT** actually stated in the documents of the historic [Second Vatican Council](#) (1962-65) and the revised *1983 Code of Canon Law*. The traditional geographical parish¹ is considered the basic juridical unit of the Catholic Church so there is no mention of Subparishes, Outstations/Mission Chapels/Sub-stations and SCCs, that is, nothing “smaller” or “lower” than the parish. While SCCs are not specifically mentioned in the code, they are indirectly referred to in the section on “Structures” under the “People of God.” The Local Churches have the freedom to carry out

¹This shows the European influence on documents of the Catholic Church with little reference to the Global South. Very little reference to the grassroots experience of Africa: rural parishes and the catechist as the backbone of evangelization.

pastoral work in parishes on the local level following their own structures and activities. This is described as the “ordering of the parish on the most local levels.”

One of these structures is SCCs. In the SCCs Model of Church in Eastern Africa (the nine AMECEA countries of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. the SCC is an official pastoral, ecclesial structure in the parish. The SCCs officially participate in the parish leadership structures. Each SCC (or a group of SCCs) has a representative on the Outstation/Mission Chapel/Sub-station, Subparish or Parish Pastoral Council. Elections start at the level of SCCs and move upwards. This insures that the Parish Pastoral Council leaders are chosen from those lay people who are already leaders in their SCCs – thus true representation from below.

Presently there are more than 195,000 SCCs in Eastern Africa.

Now we want to look more closely at No. 29. **“Men and women who exercise the ministry of coordinating a Small Church Community.”**

The 20 theologians who drafted the *Instrumentum Laboris* chose “Small Church Community” from a wide variety of terms/expressions in the reports submitted from around the world.

In Eastern Africa (AMECEA countries) we have a long history and many reasons for the changes:

1966: Small Communities of Christians.

1973: Basic Christian Communities.

1974: Small Local Christian Communities.

1976 on: Small Christian Communities (chosen as the official name for Eastern Africa). **NOT** Small Catholic Communities.

We recall the study from the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA that cites 5,500 names worldwide to describe this ecclesial structure we call “Small Christian Community.” We agreed that the name we choose should fit our specific local context in Eastern Africa – or wherever we are living in the world. No one size fits all.

Our preferred wording right now is: **Small Christian Community/Small Church Community/Basic Christian Community and the local equivalents.**

The 20 theologians who drafted the *Instrumentum Laboris* also chose the name “Coordinator” as the name for the leader of a SCC – the specific name for this new lay ecclesial minister. We were asked to give feedback on the language and meaning of this new minister: “Coordinator of a Small Church Community.” Here are some of the many names (alphabetically)

used in Eastern Africa for the “Leader” (a generic term) of a SCC that the document calls “Coordinator:”

Accompanier
 Animator
 Chairperson
 Convenor
 Coordinator
 Facilitator
 Moderator
 Responsible
 Servant of the Servants
 Supervisor

After a lot of discussion and discernment SCC members in Eastern Africa chose “Animator” as the best name/title.

When we get official documents from the Vatican we wonder if the people responsible really know what is going on in the Global South, that is, the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia. For example, developing new lay ecclesial ministries in SCCs is not new. We have been doing it for years in Eastern Africa based on our local, grassroots pastoral experience. The “Appendix” of our free, online Ebook [Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa](#) has a section on “Lay Ecclesial Ministries in Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa.”

Over the years lay ecclesial ministries in SCCs in Eastern Africa have evolved in responding to the contemporary signs of the times. After Vatican II for many years in the Catholic Church there was a lively debate about the use and meaning of the word “ministry.” Certain people did not want to use the name “minister” for a lay person, but it is widely accepted now. The popular usage today includes the legitimacy and importance of non-ordained lay ecclesial ministries officially recognized by the Catholic Church. In some cases there is an official installation or induction.

There are various leadership models, types and styles of lay ministry. In the spirit of being a new way of being and becoming church, the emphasis is on service rather than authority, especially servant leadership. A lay minister is a servant of the servants. A lay minister is not a boss. There are two distinct roles. Sometimes this lay ministry is to animate, facilitate and coordinate activities within the SCC. Sometimes this lay ministry represents the SCC at the outstation, sub-parish and parish levels.

It is common for a SCC to have a Chairperson,² Vice-Chairperson, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Treasurer (including stewardship) and Assistant Treasurer. The Executive Committee consists of the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. Often the Chairperson

² Called by many names as explained throughout this book. Some examples: Servant of the Servants (*Mhudumu wa Wahudumu*).

and Secretary represent the SCC on the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC). To have all six positions in one SCC can be overly bureaucratic.

Specific lay ecclesial ministries go by many different names, types and responsibilities.³ One SCC member may be responsible for more than one ministry in his/her SCC. 31 Lay Ecclesial Ministries in SCCs are listed in the “Appendix” of our Ebook. Two examples:

1. Healing Minister. Although not common, some SCCs choose one designated lay person to pray over and lay hands on the sick, etc. This started among the Luo-speaking SCCs in Musoma Diocese in Tanzania in the 1970s.
2. Marriage Ministers⁴ that goes by many names. Ideally this is a committed, experienced Catholic lay couple who serve as:
 1. Single Mother Pastoral Accompanier.
 2. Marriage Animators (before and after marriage like a Formation Animator). Includes Marriage Pastoral Accompaniers (before and after marriage).⁵ Also referred to as Marriage Mentors after marriage.⁶
 3. Marriage Counselor⁷ (after marriage).

It is important to choose Young People (Young Women and Young Men) as Lay Ecclesial Ministers. It is important to have Young People on the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC), for example,

³ Particular countries, dioceses and parishes have particular ministries in the SCCs.

⁴ This person works closely with marriage-related movements and organizations such as (alphabetically) Couples for Christ, Family Enrichment Clubs, Marriage Encounter, Pre-Cana, Project Rachel and True Love Waits.

⁵ In recent documents and talks Pope Francis recommends Marriage Pastoral Accompaniers especially in the first five years of marriage. What accompaniment can be offered to divorced and remarried Catholics (irregular couples). Blessings of the individuals in such marriages are now permitted. After the Synod on Marriage Pope Francis mentioned the “Penitential Path” as one pastoral solution. After a long period of prayer and discernment the couple can return to the sacraments (Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist).

⁶ The Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB)’s “Results of the Consultation in Kenya on the 46 Questions in the *Lineamenta* on *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World* has a very good section explaining how a happily married couple can “mentor” (serve as “mentors”) for a newly married couple.

⁷ “Counselor” or Counseling” is a tricky word because for many people it is interpreted as “problem-centered.” Research surveys in Kenya indicate that many couples faced by marital problems do not seek real counseling. Only 1.8% seek professional psychological counseling. Men in particular resist counseling and deny that they have a “problem” with fidelity, alcohol, spending money, etc. Perhaps “marriage guidance” is a better term.

a young woman and a young man. A parish in Newark Archdiocese, New Jersey, USA has both a Teen Representative and a Young Adult Representative on its PPC.

During the panel there was a presentation and discussion on the Ministry of Preaching and Lay Eucharistic Preaching as possible new lay ecclesial ministries. Research shows that the homilies and sermons of priests and deacons are criticized for various reasons. Flowing from their baptism trained lay people including women could be effective preachers.

Research shows also most priests prepare their homilies and sermons without the help of others. This misses a great opportunity to draw on the wisdom and experiences of others. The *2013 Pastoral Plan of Lansing Diocese*, Michigan, USA states:

I [the bishop of Lansing] would like our Department of Formation to provide more opportunities for improving the quality of our homilies for both priests and deacons. In addition, I urge all priests and deacons to become part of some homily preparation session, perhaps with other clergy or with some parishioners, which would meet weekly, or at least regularly, to study, pray over and reflect upon the upcoming Sunday readings.

One suggestion that came in the discussion afterwards is the importance of having a lay ecclesial minister/ministers involved in the “Penitential Path.” This is the spiritual process introduced by Pope Francis after the 2015-2016 Synod to assist divorced and remarried couples who are outside the Catholic Church (“irregular” couples who have not gotten an annulment). return to the sacraments and once again be able to receive Holy Communion. This is a practical, pastoral solution, but many people don’t know about this method. Over a period of one or two years a priest leads the couple through a process of prayer, reflection, sorrow, contrition and forgiveness and amendment that can lead them to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation and receive communion again. A committed married Catholic lay couple can assist and accompany in this process.

As we move ahead in developing new lay ecclesial ministries in the Synodal Process in the Catholic Church, we live out the Spanish proverb used around the world: *We create the path by walking.*

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